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Edited by Laura Grindstaff, Ming-Cheng M. Lo, and John R. Hall

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Three propositions toward a cultural sociology of climate change

Zeke Baker

Introduction

"What does culture have to do with climate change? Everything." Thus opens the program to a 2013 art exhibition and festival titled "Climate is Culture," hosted in Toronto, Canada, by the Cape Farewell Foundation. "We need a cultural shift in our ambition, behavior and values," the directors declare, and so "Cape Farewell engages and inspires our greatest creative and visionary minds to... [envision] and help create the non-carbon society we must all aspire to." Contemporary social commentary, certainly not limited to Cape Farewell, frequently invokes "culture" as a central component of policy and social (in)action concerning global warming, often construing the climate change issue as a "culture war" (Hoffman 2012). Yet there exists no organized cultural sociology of climate and climate change. This situation is problematic not only because of how sociologists might intervene in moments of "culture war," but more fundamentally because what "climate" means varies considerably among scholars of culture, and sociological theories of culture have had little import for studying climate change. This chapter therefore outlines a cultural approach to a sociology of climate (and climate change). Unlike most approaches to climate change, it takes culture – not scientific projections, political economy, or policy goals – as the starting point for analysis. In other words, I wager that we can understand climate-society relations best when we take culture as constitutive of that relationship, rather than a "variable" affecting a technical outcome of concern.

To begin, this chapter explains why cultural sociologists have rarely engaged issues of climate. I then advance three propositions toward establishing a cultural sociology of climate, illustrated by examples drawn from others' and my own research. Each proposition opens up areas for cultural-sociological inquiry and for refining existing problematics within cultural sociology. First, climate is not reducible to a physical system "out there," and the effects, trajectories, and interpretations of climate(s) are constitutively intertwined through cultural processes. In other words, the effects of weather are legible through cultural refraction, such that relationships between climate and society rest on context-specific interpretive practices. Second, to understand contemporary climate change, we must historicize "climate," "culture," and the vexing term "civilization" as fundamentally related and embattled categories – both historically and in our era, tied especially to dynamics of symbolic power. Third, modern climate science and

policies remain culturally embedded, and the cultural authority around "adaptation" strategies and climate futures is a critical site of contemporary cultural politics.

Whither "climate" in cultural sociology?

As Bruno Latour (1993), Noel Castree (2001), and others have demonstrated, a dualism between "nature" and "culture" underlays both the modern *episteme* and conventional sociological analysis. Sociologies of culture, therefore, have historically held a reasoned ambivalence toward the whole set of problems long associated with "nature." Nature and its representations through scientific spokespersons are alleged to exist in a separate domain, walled off from concerns of cultural sociologists.

The history of the human sciences helps explain boundaries between cultural interpretation and naturalistic explanation, particularly of environmental-social dynamics. On the one hand, as human sciences developed within colonial contexts, "culture" was employed to explain differential trajectories of societies in ways that valorized particular "civilized" engagements with nature over "uncivilized" ones. As I shall discuss in detail, the modern category of "climate" is significantly wrapped up in this history insofar as climate dynamics allegedly helped explain human difference and cultural development. Broadly speaking, by aligning the study of nature, especially climate, with that of culture, early ethnological and social scientific inquiry largely settled on validating social hierarchies as a matter of natural-climatic laws or historical socio-evolutionary patterns. Of course, such a climate-culture trajectory naturalized social reality and hence became increasingly problematic for subsequent social scientists.

On the other hand, yet as a result, sociologists until quite recently came to oppose environmental "determinism" by situating the domain of culture squarely on the axes of values, symbols, language, and representations. Outside of human geography and physical anthropology, social science approaches to culture therefore took up elements of nature mostly as symbols for meaning-making practices about the social. This lineage extends at least from Emile Durkheim's analysis of social order in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* to cultural anthropologists including Branislow Malinowski (1948) and later Mary Douglas (1966) and Clifford Geertz (1973). Insofar as this lineage of scholars engaged the imbrication of natural and social orders, it did so largely in order to demonstrate that cultural codes signify the natural world through myth, discourse, and classificatory practices that construct it as a mirror, totem, or expression of social life. Natural order, in other words, was woven into broader, social "webs of significance." However, these moves left climate as at most a static backdrop to a sociocultural drama.

Even through the "cultural turn," cultural sociology maintained such an orientation to nature, especially when taking up objects of inquiry associated with a broadly modern/postmodern epoch, with its post-materialist values (Inglehart 1997) and other cultural dynamics associated with "postindustrial" society. To the extent that nature and "the environment" mattered in this trajectory, concern for it arose variously from a reflexively modern or "risk" society via a synthesis of romantic subjectivity, the devastating effects of instrumental domination, and the simulacra of spectacular capitalism. By and large, however, what we might label the society-culture question, most recently in the "Strong Program" heralded by Jeffrey Alexander, trumped the *climate*-culture question that had preoccupied much theoretical debate about cultural dynamics well into the twentieth century, for example, in the human geographer Ellsworth Huntington's ([1915] 1924) landmark text, *Civilization and Climate*.

The intellectual contexts for cultural sociology roughly span the same period during which climate science emerged, beginning in the 1960s, and gaining strength in subsequent decades. However, the trajectories were separate: climate and climate change as scientific issues

remained remote from the interests of cultural sociologists. Thus the complaint of "environmental" sociologists – who have engaged the issue of climate change most resolutely since the 1990s – reflected the original program of the "New Ecological Paradigm." Associated initially with Catton and Dunlap (1978), this paradigm claimed that sociology writ large, especially structural-functionalism but also cultural analysis under the auspices of postmodernism, had proceeded, in Raymond Murphy's (1995) terms, "as if nature did not matter." Although "constructivist" analyses of climate change have emerged sporadically within environmental sociology (Rosa and Dietz 1998; Hannigan 1995; Yearley 2009), central analytic approaches to the issue have been and remain political-economic (Clark and York 2005), socio-ecological (Dunlap and Brulle 2015), or related to socio-political mobilization (McCright and Dunlap 2011).

Culture, caught between "constructivism" and realism or ecological materialism, therefore holds an ambiguous position within environmental sociology, a situation reflected by the general absence of cultural analysis in the recent "Task Force on Sociology and Global Climate Change," published through the American Sociological Association (Dunlap and Brulle 2015). There, culture is either reduced to "public opinion" (Shwom et al. 2015:278) or considered as "a driving force of consumption and decision-making," often captive to "intentional efforts to shape culture by those in power" (Rosa et al. 2015:44). Such an approach, especially concerned with how consumer culture drives climate change through a "treadmill of consumption" (ibid.), is undoubtedly important, yet it does not investigate the wider analytical significance of culture, which roughly defines cultural sociology both in the Strong Program and more broadly. The following three propositions therefore chart possible paths into the hinterlands between cultural sociology and the developing sociology of climate change.

Proposition 1: cultural refractions – climate is more than a physical system

Cultural sociologists have long rejected propositions holding that physical or economic conditions determine or define social life. This rejection needs to be reaffirmed in developing ways that sociologists conceptualize climate and climate change. An initial and basic proposition is that climate cannot be taken as simply the physical system "out there" that appears in statistical accounts or in climate change scenario projections. Physical phenomena of the atmosphere, land, and water are, first and foremost, experienced in their capricious immediacy. The impacts and effects of weather are, moreover, perceived and interpreted in culturally refracted ways. Like Howard Becker's marijuana users, who rely on one another to evaluate the experience of "being high," experiences of weather are conditional on meaningful social context. As a basic example, consider the 2016 standoff at Standing Rock, during which Sioux tribal leaders, members, and other activists braved frigid temperatures (and water cannons) in protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline for transporting crude oil. Participants claimed the weather was dangerous but also provided a means for movement solidarity by organizing the division of labor at the encampment, by synthesizing traditional teepee shelters and imported goods, and by rejecting police discourse that the bitter cold could be used as a "scare tactic" (Gaffen and Scheyder 2016). Weather, as this example highlights, is experienced through cultural forms, in this case, solidarity through the material culture of shelter, warmth, and collective resistance.

Compared to "the weather" as a phenomenon of the existential moment, climate is more difficult to pin down as an experienced reality, often involving more layers of interpretation and abstraction. As Mike Hulme (2015:3) suggests, "the idea of climate" provides a way of "navigating between the human experience of a constantly changing atmosphere and its attendant insecurities, and the need to live with a sense of stability and regularity." Thus, like weather effects

and events, "climate" is a matter of experience, knowledge, and interpretation in collective life. This circumstance yields important entry points for cultural sociologists. A major question is how communities or groups perceive and interpret environmental changes, and how these interpretations either express related (even global) patterns, or otherwise reorganize cultural life at various scales. Methodological developments like multisite ethnography (Marcus 1995) notwithstanding, anthropologists addressing this question focus primarily on specific (often indigenous) communities. Krupnik and Jolly (2002), for example, trace how Arctic natives interpret local, dramatic sea-ice changes through a combination of inherited traditions and the tools of climate scientists (see also Crate and Nuttal 2009; Barnes and Dove 2015).

The cultural sociology of media, cultural consumption, and everyday life remains incompletely developed in research relevant to climate change, especially in comparative contexts. Such work might take inspiration from the "ethnoclimatologies" (Orlove, Chiang, and Cane 2002) described by anthropologists. A variety of questions emerge. How do mobile individuals who circulate through privileged environments experience changes in the manicured climates of offices, homes, cars, foreign vacation sites, and idealized or vicarious media experiences? And how might their experiences compare to experiences of sea-level rise in the case of many small-island societies? To what extent can cultural sociologists speak of or conceptualize "global climate change" while not erasing such cultural contexts and the various mediations of climatic experience? More important, how does social inequality manifest disparate capacities to impose climatic order on cultural life, at one extreme by modifying weather to fit cultural norms like "room temperature" or at the other extreme by adapting to severe ecological disruptions like sea-level rise that challenge cultural survival? (Garrett 2010; Weir, Dovey, and Orcherton 2016; Willette, Norgaard, and Reed 2016). In direct contrast to political and policy discourses organized around mitigation at the international level and reflected in a science until recently devoted almost exclusively to the global climate system, cultural scholars have a lot to add by beginning with a conceptualization of climate change on the ground and in the lifeworld, recognizing the multiple, uneven layers of climatic meaning and experience.

Proposition 2: climate, culture, civilization – historicize embattled categories

Climate change is not controversial simply as a result of misinformation or "denialist" propaganda, even if challenges to widespread scientific consensus are indeed remarkable. By tracing climate historically, we can see that it is a power-laden and embattled category from the start. That we may inhabit "the Anthropocene," during which human-caused climate changes mark a new era for the Earth and humanity, should not tempt us to abandon historical analysis. Yet scholars have thus far embarked on diverse and disconnected historical forays into issues of culture and climate, and cultural sociologists unfortunately have not weighed in. Historical sociology is in part focused on understanding the terms by which present knowledge, politics, and movements have formed and developed, and through counterfactual analysis or critique, to offer up possible alternative explanations or paths. As John Walton (2001) has argued, history is constitutively both event and narrative, and historical analysis is itself an intervention into the narrative about particular events or developments. Here lies a fruitful entry point for historical-cultural sociologies of climate.

Let us start by noting that rather fuzzy concepts of culture have been employed in recent historical studies. Anderson, Maasch, and Sandweiss (2007:3) frame an impressive collection of physical-anthropological studies into "climate and culture change" by stating, "to understand the consequences of sustained higher than average temperatures, we believe that changes in climate and culture that occurred during the Mid-Holocene warm period [c. 7000–3000 BCE]

are the best case that we can explore in detail." By labeling "culture" as the totality of human organization within environmental constraints, such constraints reductively equate culture with temperature in radically different periods, namely the Mid-Holocene and today. In this view, temperature is a driver of culture. More nuanced, Behringer (2010) performs a cultural history of the Little Ice Age (c. 1500–1850 CE). For this period of variable but extreme cooling, he shows how witchcraft trials, winter landscape painting, and demonological theologies in northern Europe reflected a broad "allegory of collapse" that made meaningful the suffering associated with winter storms, failed harvests, and associated social unrest and moral anxieties (2010:141). Behringer considers the period "a trial run of global warming" insofar as paleoclimatic and cultural dynamics can be traced together (2010:vii). For all that histories such as this provide in accounting for climate-culture relations, however, they often fail to problematize the modern category of "climate" itself. On this point sociological approaches are critical to understanding climatic patterns that are notable in terms not only of physical changes but of the cultures through which such climates are known and engaged.

In modern historical development, roughly since the mid-seventeenth century, "climate" emerged as a way for scientists, explorers, and travelers to make sense of human, social, and natural difference. In particular, Enlightenment natural and political histories developed neo-Hippocratic theories of climate that allegedly helped to explain "culture," "civilization," and their degree of attainment among various groups (on "civilization" and "culture" but *not* climate, see Williams 1983:57–60, 87–93; Bauman 1985; Mazlish 2005). Thus, English natural philosopher James Dunbar argued in 1780, "hot" tropical climates engendered societies that were "cultivated slowly, and with inferior ardor," whereas climates "more pernicious in nature" (in his analysis, Northern Europe) made up for natural deficiencies with "the resources of industry and invention" (Dunbar 1780: 209–10). Over time, Dunbar claimed, civilizing land and political order rendered his native English climate more temperate, productive, healthy, and superior.

Through the nineteenth century, a strongly civilizational logic undergirded the scientific development and cultural salience of "climate." Notably, climate provided a means for organizing historical and future social trajectories in a time of grave meteorological uncertainties – for instance among migrants and settlers – and of imperial ambitions among colonial and national states (Duncan 2007; Golinski 2008). The intellectual stakes of recovering such a history of climate are high. If global warming threatens us, who, as Oreskes and Conway (2014:ix) provoke, are the "children of Enlightenment" facing the possible "collapse of Western civilization," climate, civilization, and culture remain embattled, related categories. The unmet challenge is to perform a thoroughly historicized sociology of contemporary climates by piecing together the events and narratives that have constituted "climate" and "civilization" over time.

Proposition 3: cultural authority – climate futures are a site of struggle

Like meteorological sciences in the eighteenth century, climate knowledge, whether among climate modelers, "adaptation" policy experts, or communities around the world, remains culturally embedded. Also, as in previous periods, cultural authority asserted for climate knowledge remains unevenly distributed across social, geographic, and cultural contexts. Yet sociologists have yet to address climate knowledge as a domain of credibility struggles and, more broadly, the accumulation and exercise of symbolic power. That in 2012 Donald Trump might proclaim global warming a hoax perpetrated by China baffled observers, but it raises a fundamental question: how do scientists' (and their critics') representations of global, regional, and local climates come to count as legitimate knowledge and thereby form a basis of social action and power?

By treating science as cultural production, scholars associated with science and technology studies (STS; Demeritt 2001; Edwards 2010; Shackley and Wynne 1996; Yearley 2009) have shown how climate science is constituted as an assemblage of different kinds of experts, data, and technologies, as well as different modes of knowing, measuring, and experiencing the world. As Steven Epstein (2008) has suggested, scholars working in cultural sociology might benefit from engaging STS work on issues of scientific-cultural production, especially regarding climate change. Some work in this vein has emerged. For example, Demeritt (2001) and Hulme (2014) show how a specifically technocratic worldview has developed among climate scientists who work "upstream" from climate politics, as they settle controversies surrounding climate modeling and present findings to scientific and policy audiences. To follow up on this line of inquiry and without either dismissing or endorsing the findings of climate scientists, cultural scholars might reflexively engage proposed capacities to "stabilize" the global climate through policy, and technological, intervention. How are such managerial visions, along with other imaginaries of climate-society equilibrium (or collapse), accomplished?

Beyond the epistemic communities of scientists, how climate change knowledge institutes climate futures casts into relief the assumptions of policymakers and experts, on the one hand, and the lived experiences within communities on the other, and the two increasingly interact in terms of a paradigm of "climate adaptation." Embedded within this paradigm is a cultural politics over "adaptation" itself. In a dynamic, uncertain world, the struggles concern *who* gets to say what is happening or will happen and how people should or will respond. Will it be scientists, national security experts, insurance forecasters, energy technologists, or vulnerable populations (who are also internally stratified)? These questions suggest that climate impacts and futures are settled through symbolic power and cultural negotiation, not "adaptation" as such. However, we know little about such culturally infused processes. One possible approach is to follow the lead of Marcus Taylor (2014), who rejects "adaptation" as an analytic framework and instead examines cases of what he calls "relational vulnerability" in which climate impacts are shaped by historical and ongoing socio-ecological marginalization that is in fact perpetuated by formal "adaptation" policies.

Taylor and other political ecologists (Davis 2015; Leach and Mearns 1996) have published a number of case studies of what Michael Goldman (2004) labeled the "eco-governmentality" often reflected in narratives of environmental change. Sociological concepts – especially Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and symbolic capital in relation to state and market logics, but also those of valuation (Lamont 2012) and place-based identities (Gieryn 2000) – could be deployed to yield a deeper understanding of how climate policies reflect, extend, or resist existing cultural dynamics of power. For example, in ongoing research by myself and colleagues among water managers during California's recent severe drought, questions of "adaptation" to a changing hydrology highlight cultural conflicts over the meanings of water, climate, and the future (Baker et al. 2018). For the state of California, climate change is a set of parameters that must enter into engineering, policy, and capital-investment decisions in order to reduce uncertainties that interfere with water-supply planning and economic growth. Constructing water and climate as meaningful categories for "adaptation" in this way conflicts with some Indian tribes who, living on ancestral lands in historically diverted and polluted watersheds, view state strategies not as adaptive, but as compounding long-standing threats against traditional subsistence fishing and other cultural practices. Here, and I submit elsewhere, the meaning and content of "resiliency" and "adaptation," like the basic categories of climate and weather addressed previously, is an important question for analysts of cultural politics.

Cultural authority over the future has always proved especially contentious. As with Francis Bacon's seventeenth-century vision of philosophical "priests of nature" in the *New Atlantis*, or with Max Weber's early twentieth-century distinction between priestly authority and prophetic

revelations, so with recent claims by James Hansen and colleagues (2016) that multiple-meter, catastrophic sea-level rise may occur within the next century. In each of these moments, taking hold of the future is an inevitably political enterprise. The temporal axis of cultural representation and power is a final aspect of climate change to which cultural sociologists might productively orient themselves. How are temporal frames for action achieved? Emerging work (Hall 2016; Hjerpe and Linner 2009; Skrimshire 2010) asks especially how utopian (or dystopian) representations of future scenarios are structured by present social relations in ways that animate conflicting worldviews. Others show how futures are generated within the epistemic cultures of science (Edwards 2010; Luke 2015) – which as Hansen et al.'s (2016) rejection of the moderate sea-level-rise projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shows, are by no means unitary. Analyses of such futures, however, have yet to sufficiently follow these future-constructions through society. To do so, we must ask, how are the production, circulation, and application of conflictual futures and their effects connected in the contemporary? As I have already indicated with respect to the issues of "adaptation" and the variable interpretations of weather and climate, this question can be addressed in various historical periods and existing contexts. Yet "following" climate in this way likely will entail transgressing topical and disciplinary terrains upon which both existing climate change scholarship and cultural sociology have thus far proceeded.

Conclusion

Embroiled in the 1950s national revolutionary movements in Africa, Frantz Fanon (1959:245) declared that "culture is not left in cold storage during the conflict." By this he meant that it is necessary to study culture to understand the interplay of tumultuous conditions and the inner life of people, and only on this basis is it possible to make legible intellectual interventions and political alternatives. Lacking the gift of divination, we can still reasonably assume that social conflict will increasingly organize around climate change, whether between political parties, between competitors for climate-impacted resources, or between ways of life and capacities to legitimately speak for people's experiences, environments, and their futures. In order to approach these issues from disciplined points of strength, this chapter brought together three propositions that can help to organize cultural-sociological research and, to extend Fanon's metaphor, help to pull the cultural analysis of climate out of cold storage. We began with a cultural conception of existential experience and, by extension, of the meanings and interpretations of "climate" itself. Conceptual and empirical specification regarding climate and culture, I showed, requires greater historical work insofar as modern climate knowledge and interpretations have a cultural history that sociologists have yet to appreciate. Thus contextualized and situated, climate knowledge, interpretation, and collective experience – wherever we find them – emerge as loci of struggle, negotiation, and conflict. Building on these initiatives, we can pry open how credibility is assigned or lost, how symbolic power is exercised, and how constructions of and struggles over the future proceed in the contemporary. Climate change as culture – in meanings and practices – runs much deeper than we have understood so far. Thus, the future of climate change will be shaped in part by whether and how we reflexively come to terms with its cultural instantiations.

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